

Book Reviews

Suresh Chandra Babu and Ashok Gulati. *Economic Reforms and Food Security: The Impact of Trade and Technology in South Asia*. New York: Food Products Press, 2005. 483 pages. Price not given.

This book covers a wide range of issues relating to food security (in order of hierarchy) including the globalisation and liberalisation of trade, the WTO Agreement on Agriculture and Intellectual Property Rights, market reforms, technological options, diversification and research needs, water security, and household food security. Further, recommendations are made to cope with challenges of food insecurity.

The authors emphasise the need of continuity of the current trend of reforms and devising new policies for the agricultural, food, and natural resources sectors. The issues of poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition are being faced across South Asia. These are important not only on economic grounds but also on ethical grounds. The volume's twenty one chapters, divided into seven parts, have been contributed by twenty-nine experts. Part I discusses economic reforms, trade, technology, and food security. The authors analyse food security situation in the region in the long-run perspective and discuss policy imperatives to cope with this challenge. Among the recommendations, are the need for investment in human resources, improvement in rural infrastructure, development of pro-poor technologies, and promotion of regional cooperation.

Part II relates to trade liberalisation and food security in South Asia and the authors discuss trade liberalisation policies in the region in detail. Some of the conclusions of the discussion are that, since 1980, positive food trade balance in the region could be achieved only by India and Sri Lanka; trade liberalisation in food grains contributed to the achievement of food security in Bangladesh through increased food supply; the key challenge for the South Asian governments is to further assist the groups adversely affected by liberalisation; AoA of WTO should properly address concerns of developing countries, especially relating to food security, and increased funding should move from international and bilateral organisations to developing countries, both for food security and poverty alleviation.

Part III covers the theme of technology for food security in South Asia. The authors point out that South Asia has almost no land in reserve for agriculture and 80 million hectares of land in the region is under severe risk due to unsustainable farming practices. This situation demands development of new environmentally

sustainable technologies for growth in agriculture and food security especially for small farmers. Other major conclusions drawn and recommendations put forward include: technology transfer is not as free as it was in the Green Revolution era, so a framework is needed to facilitate technology transfer; future growth in agriculture should mainly be led by high-value commodities; development of biotechnology is facing several issues, so an appropriate policy framework should be designed and implemented, like protecting intellectual property rights of breeders, genetic resources, and interests of small farmers and consumers.

Part IV highlights the challenge of water and food security in South Asia. The authors underline the importance of irrigation water in agricultural development and food security. Considering the complex system of water sharing across the South Asia region, the authors identify several issues and challenges facing the irrigation systems in South Asia. They recommend designing innovative reforms to cope with various challenges, evolving policies aimed at regulating the demand for water in the industrial and the urban sector, promoting of efficient and participatory institutions, re-orientating the irrigation system in such a way that it can sustain soil resources, and developing technologies which can aid farming in water-scarce conditions.

Part V carries a debate on market reforms, diversification, and food security. The authors consider agricultural diversification as a new opportunity for the promotion of high-value agricultural products like fruit, vegetables, livestock, and fish products. They look at the benefits like increase in farmers' income, and generation of employment opportunities, which can translate into alleviation of poverty. They have traced a trend of diversification in South Asia and indicate that if diversification is appropriately carried out, most of the pertinent challenges like shrinking landholdings, decelerating technological advances in staple crops, declining investments in agriculture, and increasing natural resource degradation can be overcome. Two major recommendations of the authors are: appropriate policies and infrastructure should be developed to enable the small farmers to benefit from diversification; and investment in R&D should be increased to promote diversification.

Part VI gives a detailed overview of food security interventions in South Asia. Looking at the food insecurity problem of the poorest of the poor they point out that child mortality in South Asia is more than twice that in East Asia and the Pacific; and life expectancy in the region is almost one decade less as compared to East Asia and the Pacific. The authors have also identified the prevalence of some distinctive measures of food security like India's Employment Guarantee Scheme, Bangladesh's Food for Education scheme, and other safety-net programmes. They argue that since poverty is one of the important factors restricting the poor, food for education is a creative way of addressing the short-term needs of the poor, and also to bring them out of poverty in the long run. The authors attribute the failure of some specific

targeted schemes to the lack of essential and structural policies aiming at promotion of agricultural growth and alleviation of poverty.

The last part of the book identifies the emerging issues relating to food security. The authors emphasise that Globalisation can benefit the poor and hungry if appropriate and supportive policies and institutions are in place. The main hurdle blocking the flow of the benefits of liberalisation and globalisation, in South Asia, is that markets of agricultural products in developed countries are highly subsidised and over-protected, thus denying access to South Asia. Suggested measures include strengthening of the position of the South Asia in the WTO and the creation of a regional free trade area. Other recommendations are for new technologies in agro-ecological, conventional breeding, and biotechnology, which should be developed and adopted through institutions allowing the small farmer participation. The authors highlight the importance of media in agricultural development and the need of strengthening policy research communication.

Overall, the chapters have been integrated in a meaningful manner. Country-specific chapters are also part of the book, like “Trade Liberalisation and Food Security in Bangladesh”, “Pricing Subsidies and Institutional Reforms in Indian Irrigation”, “Agricultural Trade Policy Issues for Pakistan in the Context of the AoA”, etc.

The authors have identified several issues relating to poverty, food security, and emerging challenges for agriculture, especially those under the WTO regime. Indeed, there are some knowledge gaps. That human resource development can be made instrumental in poverty alleviation is not addressed. Secondly, inclusion of the role of the NGOs, grass-roots level institutions, and indigenous system of social safety nets could also have added value to the book. Thirdly, in the present knowledge economy, growth and development can hardly be sustained without making substantial progress in knowledge management. Several industries and sectors of the economy, notably the oil and gas industry, have tremendously benefited from the application of knowledge management tools. Fourthly, hundreds of poverty alleviation and agricultural development projects are undertaken in the region, involving investment of billions of dollars every year. Some of them succeed but many of them fail to deliver the intended benefits to the intended beneficiaries. Until this issue is properly addressed, the objectives of poverty alleviation interventions may not be achieved. Still there is a good inventory of several useful practices and plenty of country experiences relating to poverty, food security, agricultural development, etc., across the region. These would be of great interest to policy-makers, development professionals, and researchers.

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